

Libby

EPA widens asbestos probe

BY CHRISTOPHER THORNE

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Federal health officials said Thursday they are investigating whether vermiculite ore that was mined in Libby and shipped across the country may have spread potentially fatal asbestos contamination.

The Environmental Protection Agency is looking at 240 sites in 45 states where the vermiculite was shipped from northwest Montana.

Libby, which for decades was the world's largest supplier of vermiculite, is at the center of what lawmakers and federal officials describe as a "public health crisis."

Now they are concerned that the crisis has spread to other places where the vermiculite was taken for processing into soil conditioner or for

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use in making home insulation.

Lung cancer and fatal asbestos poisoning rates in Libby are 40 to 60 times higher than expected there, the asbestos contamination brought by breathing in the dust from the vermiculite. W.R. Grace and Co. closed the mine in 1991 after 67 years of operation.

At least 22 of those 240 sites have been identified for cleanup, Marianne Horinko, assistant administrator of the EPA's Solid Waste and Emergency Response Office, said in testimony before a hearing of the Senate Superfund subcommittee.

The one site at highest risk is the Western Mineral Products plant in Minneapolis, which processed vermiculite into insulation and fireproofing from

1936 to 1985.

"We are very concerned about the other sites that have received asbestos-contaminated vermiculite," said Henry Falk, assistant administrator of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, an office within the Health and Human Services Department.

At this preliminary stage, however, Horinko said that the 22 sites other than Libby have not experienced the levels of asbestos-related sickness as seen in Montana, where as many as 200 deaths have been linked to the vermiculite and another 750 people suffer from asbestos-related illnesses.

"We have not found a pattern of asbestos contamination that in any way approaches what we've seen at Libby," Horinko said.

The health data being examined at those 22 sites are being supplied by state health departments, Falk said.

The sites are in New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Kentucky, Minnesota, Colorado, North Dakota, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Oregon and Washington.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., pressed Horinko to explain why the 22 sites aren't already designated for Superfund status, as was Libby. During the hearing, which was called by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., Murray displayed a map of the United States sprinkled with orange dots — each dot marking a town where vermiculite from Libby was shipped.

"This map should tell every single senator that this isn't a problem that somebody else has. It's a problem they have," Murray said.

"At the Libby mine, seams of tremolite asbestos run through the raw vermiculite. The asbestos fibers are a byproduct of

processing the vermiculite into soil conditioner and insulation carried into the lungs through the dust that mine workers breathe.

The fibers wedge into the lining of the lungs like needles where they develop into cancer and a condition called asbestosis, an often fatal scarring of the lungs.

The asbestos in Libby was pervasive in part due to the pervasiveness of the dust from the vermiculite. W.R. Grace, which filed for bankruptcy in January 2001, offered the vermiculite free to homeowners for use as insulation. The company downplayed the vermiculite as "the high-quality" where it was used under the running track.

And workers at the mine sickened their own families by embracing their wives and playing with their children after returning home from the mine covered with dust.